

GALLUP®

AUGUST 27, 2013

Is College Worth It?

by [Brandon Busteed](#)

Yes, but boards of trustees and college presidents need new measures of success

Higher education faces daunting challenges: soaring costs, access and completion issues, rapidly changing technology, and accountability pressures from state and federal officials. But no challenge is more daunting than the fundamental question that many Americans are now asking, "*Is college worth it?*"

As a result of the recent economic downturn, many graduates are not finding well-paying jobs.

Today, some in higher education answer this question by tracking outcome measures such as degree attainment and gainful employment. Others provide data about graduates' average starting salaries or alumni satisfaction rates. Still others cite the fact that people with bachelor's degrees earn \$1 million more over their lifetimes than those with only a high school diploma. Boards of trustees may rely on these data to make important decisions about the institutions they govern, but all of these metrics fall short of explaining why college is worth it.

As a result of the recent economic downturn, many graduates are not finding well-paying jobs. Meanwhile, over the past two decades, average tuition at American colleges and universities has jumped 248%. As a percentage of household income, tuition has risen from 23% in 2001 to 38% today.

How have Americans afforded this? The simple answer is that they haven't. Student loan debt in the U.S. recently surpassed \$1 trillion -- more than all credit card debt combined. Americans are spending money they don't have to finance educations they're not sure are worth it. This

raises the fundamental question: What should be the ultimate outcome of a college education? If college trustees are not already asking themselves this question, they must start.

What should be the ultimate outcome of a college education?

When I first joined Gallup about a year ago, I spent six months informally asking college presidents and trustees this very question. After dozens of interviews, a pattern emerged. Although the words and perspectives differed, the answers were consistent: "To improve one's lot in life" or "To prepare people for long-term success in life." Those are solid, inspiring answers. So I asked the next obvious question: "How are you measuring this?" The unanimous answer was: "We aren't."

There is an expression: "We value what we measure." It seems clear that leaders in higher education are not measuring what they value right now. But there is an alternative -- one that would lead to better educational and career outcomes for students and provide an affirmative answer to the question of whether college is worth the time, money, and effort.

Most people would agree that helping someone attain a better, fuller life is much more important than good grades and a degree. These same people also stress that college prepares a person not just for a first job out of college but for many different jobs over his or her lifetime. But how do you measure these longer-term outcomes? Gallup has conducted research that can point higher education in the right direction.

Well-being closely tied to education

Every night, Gallup surveys a representative sample of Americans, asking them to rate their lives and whether they are happy with them; we also regularly pose these same questions to people worldwide. As a result, we have discovered what the most satisfied and successful people do and, subsequently, why they rate their lives highly. In other words, we are studying the *well-being* of people around the world. Our research reinforces the fact that the ultimate outcome of an education is fundamentally about well-being. People often view well-being as happiness or wealth, but it is much more than that, and it is closely tied to education.

From our data, Gallup found five essential elements of well-being: Career, Social, Financial, Physical, and Community. These well-being elements represent the broad categories that are essential for most people to live a life that matters. (See sidebar "The Five Essential Elements of Well-Being.")

The Five Essential Elements of Well-Being

For more than 50 years, Gallup scientists have been exploring the demands of a life well-lived. More recently, in partnership with leading economists, psychologists, and other acclaimed scientists, Gallup has uncovered the common elements of well-being that transcend countries and cultures. This research revealed the universal elements of well-being that differentiate a thriving life from one spent suffering. They represent five broad categories that are essential to most people:

- **Career Well-Being:** how you occupy your time -- or simply liking what you do every day
- **Social Well-Being:** having strong relationships and love in your life
- **Financial Well-Being:** effectively managing your economic life
- **Physical Well-Being:** having good health and enough energy to get things done on a daily basis
- **Community Well-Being:** the sense of engagement you have with the area where you live

Of those five elements, Gallup finds that Career Well-Being is the most important predictor of well-being across the board. Though not a guarantee, it is likely that someone with high Career Well-Being also has high Social, Financial, Physical, and Community Well-Being. Across every country Gallup surveyed, people said that a good job trumps everything, including health and happiness. People certainly still value these things, but they usually view them as most achievable through a good job.

But what is a "good" job? In our research, we found that for people around the world, Career Well-Being is not just about earning a higher salary. It is not about the company you work for, the money you make, or the benefits you receive. It is about liking what you do, doing what you are best at every day, and having a good manager.

Getting a good job and achieving higher well-being should become the ultimate signifiers of success.

Using a workplace engagement study, Gallup surveyed 22 million employees in all types of organizations worldwide and can now define what a good job looks like and measure whether someone has one. Someone who strongly agrees (by answering 5 on a 5-point scale) with the following statements has a good job: "I like what I do each day"; "At work, I have the opportunity

to do what I do best every day"; "My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person"; and "There is someone at work who encourages my development." He or she may also strongly agree with statements such as: "I learn or do something interesting every day" and "In the last 12 months, I have reached most of my goals." Taken together, such statements describe a person who is highly engaged at work and who has high Career Well-Being.

Success starts with doing what you do best

Gallup's well-being research suggests a better way to measure meaningful outcomes in higher education. It is a measure that every college and university can use with alumni to provide a clear value proposition about the lifelong effect of a particular college degree on graduates -- and it is a measure that board members should support. Success as defined by well-being is less about students getting the highest-paying job and more about figuring out what they like to do and what they do best.

Incorporating experiential and project-based learning, internships, or mentorships into a degree program can aid in this process. The emphasis then becomes less about listing dozens of involvements on a résumé and more about making a lasting contribution to one or two. It is less about getting students recruited by a brand-name firm and more about teaching students how to identify a good manager and an engaging workplace.

In short, it is possible to reliably and consistently measure things such as whether graduates are engaged in their jobs, doing what they are best at, contributing to their communities, and generally achieving a high quality of life. Higher education has been aiming at these outcomes for a long time without ever fully knowing the result.

It's time trustees and college presidents understand how their schools are doing and then ensure that they are retooling their curriculum and student experiences to improve the results. And as opposed to seeing only how certain alumni compare with alumni from other colleges and universities, schools can now compare these results against results from the U.S. population and the world -- which is a real and meaningful measuring stick.

This measurement doesn't need to be -- nor should it be -- a new ranking system. What matters for an institution is knowing how it is doing on these measures and working to improve them every year regardless of how strong or weak its starting position is. Any number of higher education constituencies will demand knowing that institutions care about and measure these outcomes.

Helping students achieve well-being

Getting a good job and achieving higher well-being should become the ultimate signifiers of success and a measurable and definitive standard. Leaders in higher education must set their sights on helping their students and graduates achieve not only well-paying jobs but also well-being. In doing so, they will most certainly improve many intermediate outcomes along the way.

Shortsighted and insufficient measures currently shape the higher education agenda. If board members introduce better outcomes to aim for -- such as Career Well-Being -- others will find ways to achieve them. But until colleges and universities value what they measure and measure what they value, Americans will continue to ask, "Is college worth it?" And leaders in higher education might not like the answer.

A version of this article appeared in the July/August 2013 issue of [Trusteeship Magazine](#).

Brandon Busted is Executive Director, Education and Workforce Development, at Gallup.

Subscribe to receive weekly Gallup News alerts.

Never miss our latest insights.

[Sign Up](#)

RELEASE DATE: August 27, 2013

SOURCE: Gallup <http://www.gallup.com/businessjournal/164108/college-worth.aspx>

CONTACT: Gallup World Headquarters, 901 F Street, Washington, D.C., 20001, U.S.A

+1 202.715.3030

Copyright © 2016 Gallup, Inc. All rights reserved.

Gallup, Inc. maintains several registered and unregistered trademarks that include but may not be limited to: A8, Accountability Index, Business Impact Analysis, BE10, CE11, CE11 Accelerator, Clifton StrengthsExplorer, Clifton StrengthsFinder, Customer Engagement Index, Customer Engagement Management, Dr. Gallup Portrait, Employee Engagement Index, Enetrix, Engagement Creation Index, Follow This Path, Gallup, Gallup Brain, Gallup Business Journal, GBJ, Gallup Consulting, Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index, Gallup Management Journal, GMJ, Gallup Panel, Gallup Press, Gallup Tuesday Briefing, Gallup University, Gallup World News, HumanSigma, HumanSigma Accelerator, ICE11, I10, L3, ME25, NurseInsight, NurseStrengths, Patient Quality System, Performance Optimization, Power of 2, Principallnsight, Q12, Q12

Accelerator, Q12 Advantage, Selection Research, Inc., SE25, SF34, SRI, Soul of the City, Strengths Spotlight, Strengths-Based Selling, StatShot, StrengthsCoach, StrengthsExplorer, StrengthsFinder, StrengthsInsight, StrengthsQuest, SupportInsight, TX(R+E+R)=P3, TeacherInsight, The Gallup Path, The Gallup Poll, The Gallup School, VantagePoint, Varsity Management, Wellbeing Finder, Achiever, Activator, Adaptability, Analytical, Arranger, Belief, Command, Communication, Competition, Connectedness, Consistency, Context, Deliberative, Developer, Discipline, Empathy, Fairness, Focus, Futuristic, Harmony, Ideation, Includer, Individualization, Input, Intellection, Learner, Maximizer, Positivity, Relator, Responsibility, Restorative, Self-Assurance, Significance, Strategic, and Woo. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners. These materials are provided for noncommercial, personal use only. Reproduction prohibited without the express permission of Gallup, Inc.